

So You've Been Asked To Give a Speech.....

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator to stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.)

If you've been asked to give a speech, informally address a group of co-workers and colleagues at a luncheon, or give a presentation at church on Sunday, you may feel honored at first. Those feelings quickly pass and then dread sets in...

- What if I make a fool of myself?
- What if no one pays attention to me?
- What if someone asks me a difficult question and I don't know the answer?
- What if I stutter, lose my train of thought, or fall off the stage?

Most people would rather do all kinds of unpleasant things before getting up in front of an audience and giving a speech. Most people would feel more comfortable if they had public speaking skills. The way to gain confidence is to gain the skills. President John Kennedy once said, "spontaneous speeches are not worth the paper they are printed on." The opposite of being spontaneous is to be prepared. The way to prepare a good speech is to keep the following 10 steps in mind:

1. **Determine your message.** What do you want to say? Don't make the mistake of trying to tell the audience everything. It is best to pick three key messages that are most important.
2. **Assess audience knowledge level.** Is your audience familiar with the subject? What are their attitudes and preconceived notions about you and the topic? Will the audience be listening to you because they want to or because it is mandatory?
3. **Know the audience size.** Is it a small or large group? This will determine your approach with the group. Small groups tend to pay more attention and participate in the discussion by asking questions. In large groups, people feel more anonymous and therefore sit back and expect to be entertained.

4. **Consider audience demographics.** Gender, age, economic background, political affiliation, and the culture of your audience will tell you a lot about how to approach a group with a topic. It is important to consider these aspects of your audience so that you can tailor your message so that it is well received and meaningful to the group. For instance if presenting new exercise ideas to aging seniors, you would probably not incorporate rollerblading and rock wall climbing.
5. **Find out where you will speak.** In a boardroom, gymnasium, banquet hall, or outside in a garden? It helps to know the location and be ready for predictable interruptions and barriers. In a gymnasium the sound might be poor and children may run around. In a banquet hall, servers may be pouring drinks and clearing dishes. In a garden, it may start to rain or an airplane may fly overhead in the middle of your speech.
6. **Find out when you will speak.** Will you speak in the morning, over lunch or after dinner? Are you the only speaker or are there others? When speaking at breakfast, be succinct because your audience probably had to get up early to attend and don't want to be late for work. If you are the last speaker on a panel, you may need to shorten your remarks if others talked too long. In the evening, the audience may be tired and anxious to go home.
7. **Refine your message.** Tailor your message based on what you know about the audience, time and location. Hone your message and leave out all boring details and non-essential information. Don't say anything that you wouldn't mind reading about in the paper the next day. Don't use jargon or acronyms. Use statistics sparingly. Try to make statistics relatable and memorable. Instead of saying Americans eat out X billions of times a year, say the average American family eats out four times a week.
8. **Write your speech.** Make it simple and make it short. Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them. This is the best way to drive your message.
9. **Give your speech some personality.** Add some humor, if appropriate. Use visuals. Tell a relevant story or two. Work on transitional statements to use between key messages. Ask questions. Create some imagery. Share something personal about yourself. These are the things in a speech that will make it memorable and meaningful to the audience.
10. **Practice, practice, practice!** The best way to get better at public speaking is to keep practicing. It's just like learning to ride a bicycle....the more you practice, the less you fall!

So, now you are prepared. Are you still scared? If so, check out this article for more information about how to tame your public speaking anxiety:

www.stresscure.com/jobstress/speak.html.